

Grazing Lands Management Winter Grazing

NE Fact Sheet-15

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What Is It?

Winter grazing is grazing at a time when the plant is dormant. This occurs in areas that may not have the hay or feed resources necessary to feed the livestock for the entire dormant season. Planning ahead by reducing stocking rates will prepare the producer for grazing during the winter months.

Why Winter Graze?

One of the objectives of a grazing program is to increase productions and health of the native rangeland through periods of rest and grazing. A good planned grazing system applies this principle by scheduling periods of rest and grazing throughout the growing season.

Considerations

Grazing during the winter months is feasible in many different situations. The following should be considered before deciding on a winter grazing plan:

- Grass is not covered by snow – If snow covers the grass to the point that livestock cannot effectively benefit from the forage, supplemental forage will be required to maintain livestock health.
- Standing residue – After a killing frost, grazing can be done with little effect on plant survival. Four to six inches of stubble after grazing until spring is recommended for snow to capture and for wildlife cover. For more information, refer to Fact Sheet 14 (Mowing and Haying as Management Tools).
- Grass quality – The quality of the dormant grass is very low. A supplement must be fed to maintain livestock health. Young pregnant cows will need an additional forage source such as high quality hay with a supplement to meet their dietary requirements. Mature cows will be able to maintain body condition providing that the grass is open and an occasional supplement is fed during cold weather up until the third trimester. At this point, nutritional requirements will be higher.
- Plant species – One native species that can be controlled by winter grazing is the small soapweed or yucca. Once livestock learn to eat these types of plants, winter grazing on pastures with yucca will be the best control method. Yucca plants are high in protein and are quite palatable to the adventurous cow. Many ideas have been suggested as to how to teach cattle to eat these plants, such as spraying the plants with liquid feed, mowing or shredding the plans or burning them in the spring, followed by winter grazing. Producers should look at cost-effectiveness before attempting to force cattle to eat the plants.
- Effect on planned grazing systems – Winter grazing should be included as part of the grazing system if the producer practices this concept. Complete deferment of the pasture(s) during the growing season will allow for the best standing dormant season forage. Deferment of one or more pastures will mean a reduction in stocking rate during the growing season.
- Distribution – Grazing distribution of cows will generally improve during the late fall and winter because of decreased water needs and lower nutrient requirements of the cow after weaning. Utilization across a pasture will also be affected by environmental factors such as frost. Frost tends to reduce the coarseness of some forage plants and improve their utilization by cattle.

Where to Get Help

For more information on rangeland management, contact the local office of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service. NRCS personnel give technical assistance to landowners and operators through local Natural Resource Districts.